

## SHAABAN ROBERT IN THE RUSSIAN LANGUAGE

ANDREI ZHUKOV

Marehemu Shaaban Robert is well-known in Russia not only among specialists, but also in the circles of the reading public at large. It was in Russian (the only European language) in which Shaaban Robert's prose writings were translated for the first time for the general reader.<sup>1</sup> In 1963 the translation of some fragments of *Wasifu wa Siti binti Saad, mwimbaji wa Unguja* were published in a popular magazine in Moscow.<sup>2</sup> Five years later (1968) the book *Moya zhizn* (My Life, 181 pp) came out in Leningrad in 50,000 copies under my direction and with my Introduction. It included the translation of prose works by Shaaban Robert: *Kusadikika, Adili na nduguze, Maisha yangu, Wasifu wa Siti binti Saad, mwimbaji wa Unguja* and some essays - *Insha*.

In 1981, also in Leningrad, I published a new edition of Shaaban Robert's prose - *Izbrannoye* (Selected Works, 253 pp). It was printed in 30,000 copies. The book included a translation of *Maisha yangu, Baada ya miaka hamsini, Siku ya watenzi wote, Utubora mkulima* and *Wasifu wa Siti binti Saad*. Owing to the humanistic ideals of the writer, in the first place, the books won recognition and aroused interest among the reading public in Russia, as it also drew the attention of the Tanzanian and Russian press.<sup>3</sup>

The creative work of Shaaban Robert occupies a special place in the scientific research of Russian scholars. They regard him as a philosopher, a distinguished public figure, a founder of modern literature in Kiswahili who connects centuries-old traditions of Swahili oral and written literature with the demands of modern times.

In new historical conditions, i. e. in the conditions of "the colonial society", of the beginning of the struggle against colonial rule, and of the quest for ways of social development after colonialism, on the one hand, Shaaban Robert continued the poetic traditions of the Swahili folklore and literature. His great poem *Utenzi wa vita vya uhuru* is a direct brilliant continuation of the battle-epic *tendi Mapenzi bora* is a sequel of philosophic-religious as well as ethic-didactic *tendi Mashairi* by Shaaban Robert are a direct sequel of the song-poetry

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<sup>1</sup> However, the small book *Almasi za Afrika* was published in 1960 with an English translation edited by Shaaban Robert himself: Shaaban Robert, *Almasi za Afrika na tafsiri ya Kiingereza*, Tanga 1960. In the Russian language the first translation of poetry was published in the newspaper *Pravda*: Shaaban Robert, 'Svoboda' ('Istiklali ya Tanganyika'), 28th January 1963 (transl. by M. Kurgantsev).

<sup>2</sup> 'Skripka Vostochnoy Afriki' (The Violin of East Africa), in *Aziya i Afrika segodnya* (Asia and Africa today), No. 6, 1963, pp. 46-48.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, *Uhuru*, 8th August 1981; *Urusi Leo*, 6th September 1981.

heritage of Swahili *malenga*, of poems by Muyaka and some other poets of the 19th and 20th centuries.

But even in his early poetry he already turned Swahili oral traditions into the modern means of uniting and educating the people of a certain stage of historical development - the stage of the liberation from colonialism, i. e. into political means. His songs of praise - *tendi* and poems - *mashairi* glorify important social and historical events: the victory over fascism in the Second World War, the setting up of the first political organization of the Africans in Tanganyika, the independence of his motherland, etc.

On the other hand, Shaaban Robert is a creator of Swahili fiction prose. Resting on the folklore, the oral tradition, he wrote works of the fairytale genre with a philosophical and social trend (*Kusadikika*, *Kufikirika*, *Adili na nduguze*), moralizing short stories - *masomo*, *Maisha yangu*, *Baada ya miaka hamsini*, *Wasifu wa Siti binti Saad* in the *maisha* genre. His small novels *Utubora mkulima* and *Siku ya watenzi wote* objectively originated from this genre. His ethic-philosophical essays - *insha* became a peculiar sort of fiction addressed to the wide reading public.

Shaaban Robert's prose writings, while reflecting the most important events of his time, contain fundamental generalizations. In his striving for the "true (righteous) way" and meaning of life the writer believed in the power of Man and his creative potential. He was sure that mankind would find its way to happiness. In Shaaban Robert's social and philosophical search, based on abstract ethic and humanizing principles, humanitarian outlook, oriented to some amalgamation of Muslim and Christian doctrines, personality is an active agent who evokes and evolves its abilities promoting the common good. The heroes of his works, Karama, Adili, Utubora, Ayubu, Adilia - are characters who are ready to make self-sacrifices for the well-being of their people.

The life of the writer and his creative work coincided in time with the awakening of community awareness - *taifa* - a new type of the people's consciousness in the history of Tanganyika. In fact, the author personifies this unity and self-consciousness under conditions of urgent and pressing need of change in the life of the society.

The social and political views of Shaaban Robert coincided with the goals of the first public organization of Africans - the African Association of Tanganyika, which was later transformed into a political party - the Tanganyika National Union (TANU), that led people of this country to independence in 1961.

Involved in the social and political quest of intellectuals concerning the ways of post-colonial development, Shaaban Robert expressed their humanistic aspirations, abolishing colonialism and building a society based on justice and equality. So it is quite natural that the characteristic features of Shaaban Robert's *Jumuiya ya Adili* - the society of equality, free from both bounds of colonialism and obsolete and out-dated traditions, and with a social view of the human being (*Mtu ni msingi wa maendeleo ya nchi*) - have much in common with the

main statements of Ujamaa - the conception of the development of Tanganyika which was put forward by the political leaders of the country.

Affirming new social ideals and expressing views of the new intellectual elite, Shaaban Robert, through his literary works, directly participated in the development of the political and philosophical ideas of his country.

The literary activity of the writer began, when Standard Swahili (*Kistandard, Kiserekali*) was being formed and fixed in literary works, created by Europeans and published under their control. Shaaban Robert, on the one hand, had to accept these norms of Standard Swahili, but, on the other hand, being an excellent connoisseur and expert in Kiswahili, he introduced the best features and richness of the folk language and written literature into Standard Swahili. In fact, he laid down the foundation for the norm in the language of modern literature and contributed to its adoption into modern literature: in poetry, whose classic language and forms he renewed being quite aware of the differences between the poetic and the prosaic languages; in the prose genres, in *mashairi* and *insha*, in his articles devoted to the Swahili. Moreover, he taught people their mothertongue stimulating them to write and create in Kiswahili.

He tried to talk about the great thing, the most important points in the clear, but at the same time colourful and artistic original language. He is a link between the traditions of the past and the modern stage of forming a new literature in Kiswahili. Writer and poet, humanist and patriot, Shaaban Robert and his works represent the first stage of modern fiction in the Swahili language.

Shaaban Robert is the summit of the native creative search whose works are rooted both in the modern and the genuine folk tradition of Swahili culture. In his importance for and influence on the latter he can be compared to Alexandr Pushkin in the Russian, Shakespeare in the English and Goethe in the German cultures, in the sense that Shaaban Robert, like these geniuses of European culture, "aroused proud feelings with his lyre" and "echoed the voice of his people" (A. Pushkin) <sup>4</sup>

It was in Russian African Studies, where Shaaban Robert's writings became the subject of special attention. The first translations of his prose works were those into Russian, a number of scientific articles and papers on this subject were published in this language, too <sup>5</sup> To quote Arnold: "Incontestable merit of the investigation, at a high level, of the nature, aesthetic positions, the problems of content and the tendencies of artistic development (of Swahili literature, A. Zh.), belongs, in particular, to Soviet Africanistics" discovering "the nature of

<sup>4</sup> L. Harries, who mentioned that Shaaban Robert was given the name of the "Shakespeare of Africa" (Harries 1966: 4-5), also noted that he rather is the Tolstoy, Balzac, Goethe and Milton of Tanzania (Harries 1975: 190). In another paper L. Harries named him the "Swahili John Bunyan" (Harries 1971: 44, 46).

<sup>5</sup> Zhukov 1969, 1980, 1984, 1983, 1988, Zhukov & Misyugin 1970, Misyugin 1972, 1982/1993, Biktimirova, 1986, Sidorova 1983, 1990.

new literature, especially Shaaban Robert's literary works, the influence of the society on his ethics and basic humanistic conception" <sup>6</sup>

A bio- and bibliographical item on Shaaban Robert is included in the prestigious Russian Encyclopaedia of Literature <sup>7</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> "Das unbestreitbare Verdienst, Untersuchungen zu Charakter, ästhetischen Positionen, inhaltlichen Problemen und künstlerischen Entwicklungstendenzen von hohem wissenschaftlichen Rang durchgeführt zu haben, gebührt insbesondere der marxistischen Afrikanistik, besonders der sowjetischen ... Zhukovs 1969 erschienener Aufsatz 'Jazyk Suachili i sovremennaja literatura Vostochnoj Afriki' besitzt trotz seiner Kürze einen hohen theoretischen Wert ... Zhukov den aufklärerischen Charakter der neuen Literatur, besonders der Werke Shaaban Roberts, und ihre auf ihrer ethisch-moralischen und humanistischen Grundkonzeption beruhende gesellschaftliche Wirkung heraus! (Arnold 1977: 29)

<sup>7</sup> *Kratkaya literaturnaya enciklopedia* (The Short Encyclopedia of Literature), Vol. 8, 1975, p. 571 (by I. Grigorieva and A. Zhukov)

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